

Snag in SALT II: verifying treaty compliance

The latest dispute over whether the United States has the capability to verify Russian compliance with a Salt-II treaty is unfortunate because it appears to have been unnecessary. Closely examined, the divergence between the two sides is much smaller than it seemed to be initially; and the questions about U. S. capability may have been largely avoidable.

The flap started when Stansfield Turner, director of central intelligence, testified to a Senate subcommittee that it would take until 1984 to compensate completely for the loss of sophisticated listening posts in Iran, near the Soviet border. Since the posts were part of the U. S. complex for monitoring Soviet missile tests — an activity essential to verifying compliance with SALT treaty provisions — the implication was that there would be a gap in U. S. verification and the Soviets might be able to put one over on us.

But then Harold Brown, secretary of defense, issued a statement saying that, in his judgment, the gap in verification capability would be filled by alternate methods within a year. His explanation of the time discrepancy was that the Iran listening posts gathered a lot more intelligence than the minimum needed for monitoring the prospective treaty. And a CIA spokesman confirmed that point.

Nevertheless, the White House is unhappy with Admiral Turner for not making that point clear in his testimony to the senators and angry at the senators who leaked part of his testimony to the press — a "distorted" version, according to Jody Powell, press secretary. Moreover, Admiral Turner drew White House disapproval for refusing, at a meeting with reporters, to take a position on whether SALT treaty compliance could be verified. His response was that this was a "political" question.

Secretary Brown argued that a year's gap in part of the U. S. verifying process would not be fatal, since it might take most of that time to achieve signing and ratification of the treaty.

Obviously, the SALT-II treaty, for setting

limits on the number and size of strategic nuclear weapons, would not be palatable to senators, who must ratify the treaty, or the American public if the President could not guarantee, in some convincing fashion, that violations of the treaty could be detected. Verification lies close to the heart of the whole arms control process. Neither country would be willing to accept such an agreement on faith.

The U.S. complex of detection devices is highly secret. It includes satellite surveillance, naval listening posts, airborne radar equipment, and radar stations on the ground. Now that the Iran stations have been closed down, those in Turkey and elsewhere have taken on increased importance. Only the technicians can tell exactly what capabilities each kind of station possesses. Whether these are supplemented by old-fashioned espionage work is a deep secret that nobody is going to talk about.

Thus, the debate over how fully Soviet testing of new weapons can be monitored and how completely compliance with the SALT treaty can be verified, is going to be conducted partly in the dark. At some point laymen have to accept the word of the technical people; and the public has to accept the word of the political leaders. Senators are entitled to pretty complete proof, and unless they get it, they aren't likely to ratify an agreement, even if it has been signed and vouched for by the President.

With the long process of negotiation on a complicated set of limits and obligations nearing an end, the debate over SALT is bound to intensify. It's too bad that the dialogue has to be confused by discrepancies such as were highlighted the past week.